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From the Editors

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The reemergence of great-power competition in a multipolar world is seen, widely and rightly, as the most important feature of the current strategic environment. All too often today, however, historical precedents for this new global order are remembered only dimly, at best. The rise of China in the twenty-first century as a great power—and especially and increasingly as a great maritime power—calls for renewed attention to these precedents. In “Nationalism, Geopolitics, and Naval Expansionism: From the Nineteenth Century to the Rise of China,” Robert S. Ross offers a systematic survey of three historical cases that provide a useful framework for understanding the contemporary Chinese challenge: France in the 1850s under Louis-Napoléon, Germany in the two decades preceding the First World War, and the United States during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. In all three cases, naval expansionism was driven by a combination of committed political leadership and nationalist sentiment rather than by any careful strategic calculus. The geopolitical circumstances facing France and Germany caused these efforts to be ineffective and indeed counterproductive, while in the American case our geographical isolation favored the fundamental transformation of the United States into a major maritime power. Ross argues that, while China no longer faces a serious continental threat (he offers an interesting analysis here of the Russia-China relationship), its maritime ambitions are not about to go uncontested. Whether the strategic costs associated with those ambitions are worth the candle is the large question he poses to the reader. Robert Ross is a professor of political science at Boston College.

In “Escalation at Sea: Stability and Instability in Maritime East Asia,” Ian Bowers addresses one dimension of the potential strategic costs of confrontation in the South China Sea. He argues that the nature of the maritime environment itself is such that the risk of dangerous escalation of incidents at sea is less than often supposed, with reference particularly to the history of U.S.-Soviet interactions of this kind. Ian Bowers is an associate professor at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies.

The increasingly contested nature of the maritime domain of the present has an important implication for U.S. naval forces that too often is overlooked. As Christopher McMahon argues in “The Great White Fleet Sails Today? Twenty-First-Century Logistics Lessons from the 1907–1909 Voyage of the Great White
Fleet,” the sealift capabilities currently available to the U.S. military are inadequate; dangerously dependent on foreign sources; and, in any serious international conflict, highly vulnerable to destruction. This is particularly so in the western Pacific, as the Chinese continue a rapid expansion of their long-range antiship missile forces. Christopher J. McMahon currently holds the Maritime Administration Emory S. Land Chair of Merchant Marine Affairs at the Naval War College.

Two historical studies of crisis decision-making round out the current issue. In “The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Joint Chiefs: Military Operations to Meet Political Ends,” Dan Martins provides a carefully researched account of the oft-told tale of President John F. Kennedy’s management of political-military decision-making during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. Finally, in “Coalition Coordination during the Boxer Rebellion: How Twenty-Seven ‘Councils of Senior Naval Commanders’ Contributed to the Conduct of Operations,” Umio Otsuka tells the little-known story of the improvised organizational arrangement devised by the on-scene allied naval commanders to manage the crisis created by the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900. Commander Dan Martins is a serving U.S. naval officer. Vice Admiral Umio Otsuka is Director General, Defense Intelligence Headquarters, Ministry of Defense of Japan.

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